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DID DESOTO DISCOVER THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER IN
TUNICA COUNTY, MISS.

BY DUNBAR ROWLAND

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DID DE SOTO DISCOVER THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER IN TUNICA COUNTY, MISS.??*

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After the discovery of America by Columbus, the Spaniards made two heroic efforts to explore the interior of North America. De Soto and Coronado were the intrepid leaders of the expeditions, and if their routes are linked together, they almost reach across the continent from Georgia to the Gulf of California. The march of De Soto has received most attention from historians and it deserves the distinction. His coming marks the advent of the white man on the soil of six great Southern States and the narratives of his march contain the earliest accounts of the Lower South,—of its flora, fauna and topography, of the Choctaws, Chickasaws, Creeks and Seminoles.—Indian tribes famous in history, story and song, and of the discovery of the Mississippi River and the first crossing of its waters by a white race.

After the disastrous expedition of Narvaez, 1527–28, the vast region called Florida by the Spaniards was neglected. Their imagination, however, was much inflamed by the wealth found in Mexico and Peru by Cortez and Pizarro, and the next to try his fortune was Hernando de Soto, the son of an esquire of Xerez de Badajoz, who had been with Pizarro in the conquest of Peru, and who was eager to rival the exploits and achievements of Cortez and Pizarro.

The best evidence of all the incidents connected with the De-Soto expedition is, of course, the written statements, made at

* Where did DeSoto discover the Mississippi River? The Editor of these Publications holds the opinion that the place of discovery was in Tunica county, Mississippi. The question is discussed by Judge J. P. Young of Memphis and the Editor in the following papers.

the time by accurate and truthful men who accompanied it, and such narratives only can be received by the conscientious and careful historian. We have several satisfactory, accurate and reliable records of the DeSoto expedition, chief among which are several contemporary and independent narratives of the progress of the march, correctly translated from the original Spanish, viz: "Narrative of the Gentleman of Elvas," (supposed to be Benedict Fernandez), which is the longest and one of the most accurate; "The Narrative of Louis Hernandez de Biedma," the factor of the expedition, which is highly colored and unreliable; "The History of Hernando DeSoto and Florida," by Garciloso de la Vega (the Inca), compiled from oral statements of three of DeSoto's companions and written in 1591, fifty years after the expedition. This narrative is the least trustworthy as the writer had no personal knowledge of the facts. The official report of the expedition which Rodrigo Ranjel, the secretary of De Soto, drew up from his diary, made from day to day on the march, on reaching Mexico, is the accepted and best account. My authority for these estimates is Dr. E. G. Bourne, of Yale, the scholarly author of "Spain in America."

The purpose of this paper is not to trace the entire route of DeSoto's tragic expedition. My purpose is to answer, guided by the best authorities, the question: "Did DeSoto discover the Mississippi River in Tunica County, Mississippi?" Candor compels me to answer in the affirmative and to give the reasons for my conclusion and the evidence upon which it is based.

I freely admit in the outset that the claim of Memphis as the place where the great river was discovered has been accepted by some Memphians, but that acceptance has, no doubt, been based upon the narrative of Garciloso de la Vega, "The Inca," which careful and complete investigation has shown to be unreliable and not in accord with the narratives of the facts as given in all contemporary accounts.

My contention is that the Mississippi River was discovered in Tunica County, Mississippi, at Willow Point, which the map of De L'Isle made in 1718, places about 30 miles in a straight line below Memphis, and in Tunica County. Not a map, so far as

I know, gives Memphis the honor of being the point at which the Mississippi was discovered.

The most painstaking and accurate study of the route of the DeSoto expedition is that of Theodore Hayes Lewis, the learned antiquarian, archaeologist and historian, which appears in Volume VI., Pages 449-467, Publications of the Mississippi Historical Society. I quote from that authority that part of his study which deals with the march of DeSoto from April 26 to June 18, 1541, which includes his immediate journey to and crossing of the river.

"On Tuesday, April 26th, they left Chicacilla and slept at Alabamo. On Thursday they came to another savanna, where the Indians had constructed a very strong fort of palisades, which was located on the bank of a small river, near a ford. The Spaniards stormed it and drove the Indians out and across the river. This fort and ford were on the Tallahatchie river, and probably at or near New Albany, in Union County. Rocky Ford, located on section 17, town 7, range 1 east, some 15 miles below New Albany, is the last point down the river at which a crossing can be made by fording, but the topography makes it an improbable point. On Saturday, April 30th, the army left this enclosed place, turning to the westward. According to Elvas, the country they were now passing through was a wilderness of thick forests, having many marshy places that were fordable, and some basins and lakes (sluggish streams) that were not. In another place he says: "The land is low, abounding in lakes." Ranjel says they passed over bad roads leading through woods and swamps. This part of the route lay wholly within the State of Mississippi, for, had it been toward Memphis, they would have passed through a hilly region instead of one of swamps. While the route by way of Sacchuma would have been practically of the same general character, they were prevented from taking it by reason of the hostility of the Indians, for then they would have had both tribes to contend with.

"At noon on Sunday, May 8th, they arrived at the first town in Quisquis, and carried it by sudden assault. A league distant was the second town, and at the end of another league they came to the third town, "where they saw the great river." On Saturday, May 21st, they moved to a meadow lying between the river and a little town,—the fourth one. Elvas says there was a river a crossbow-shot from the first town, and that they moved to another one (Ranjel's third town), a half league from the river,

and from there to a plain near the river. The crossing was made either at Council Bend or Walnut Bend, in Tunica County, in a straight line some 25 to 38 miles below Memphis. DeL'Isle (1718) seems to have been the first geographer to attempt to map the route, and he places the crossing at "Pointe d'Oziers" (Willow Point); but the place cannot be identified. D'Anville (1735) shows "Point d'Oziers," plainly enough as being about halfway between the mouths of the St. Francis and White rivers; but this is too far down. The Chiaves map of 1598 (Ortelius' edition) and the Sanson map of 1656, the information on both of which is taken from the Elvas narrative, the Leide map (1700) having the names from Elvas and the Inca intermixed, and other maps of a similar character, are not taken into consideration.

"The Memphis theory of the location of Quisquis and the crossing, which is based upon the Inca's account, is untenable, and a fair analysis or review of his statements will show that neither the town nor the crossing was located at that point. He says: "They arrived in sight of a town called Chisca, which stood near a great river," which he calls the Chucagua; that "many Indians gathered here (on the mound) and others in a very fine wood which lay between the town and the great river;" and that "because of the many streams around there they could not use their horses." It will readily be seen that this description does not apply to the Fort Pickering mound. Ranjel gives the distance between the first and the third towns as being two leagues (over five miles); Elvas says that they moved to another (the third) town, gives the distance between it and the river as being a half league, and the Inca fills in this space with "a very fine wood." Biedma says the town was near the banks of the Espiritu Santo, which statement refers to the third town. If commentators are right, and the town was located at the Fort Pickering mound, they should follow their authority (the Inca) for "four little days journey of three leagues each, up the river," which would make the crossing about 31 miles above the mound. The reason given by the Inca for this journey of 12 leagues was the dense woods, together with the high, steep banks of the ravines leading to the river (and evidently the river banks also), "so that one could neither go up nor down them." It is a well known fact that, wherever the channel of the lower Mississippi river strikes the edge of the flood plain, it is continually cutting away the bank, so that it is perpendicular or nearly so. Therefore, this part of his description is applicable to all such places. It should be borne in mind, however, that none of the narratives mention this journey."

The scholarly study of Mr. Lewis was published in 1902 and no historian has thought it wise to question his conclusions.

The best translation of the narratives of the DeSoto expedition is found in the "Narratives of DeSoto," edited by Edward Gaylord Bourne, LL. D., Professor of History in Yale University, published in 1904, in two volumes as a part of "The Trail Makers." In his introductory note he gives an accurate estimate of the narratives of the expedition and in his opinion "The Inca" cannot be relied on. John G. Shea, another authority on the route of DeSoto, is of the same opinion. All the narratives, with the exception of "the Inca's," were written by participants in the expedition and were contemporary with it.

My purpose in presenting this question is to correct what I believe to be an error which has almost become an accepted fact among many well informed and intelligent people. If I am depriving the great and prosperous City of Memphis of one of her most cherished traditions, let me assure her people that I do so with regret. If some of your images are broken by this discussion, truth requires it. If you are in error in claiming that DeSoto discovered the great river from your beautiful bluffs, I know that you will graciously concede it and heartily accord the honor to the State which bears the name of the mighty stream, discovered by the intrepid Spaniards three hundred and seventy-five years ago.

State Department of Archives and History,
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